



New aluminum arches will welcome passengers about to climb the main salon stairway.

Waiting for the *Julia Belle Swain*

Story and photos by John Gabbert

Does the river miss the *Julia Belle Swain* — this graceful belle with her swan-like profile, whooshing red paddlewheel, fluted stacks, chuffing ‘scape pipes and merry calliope?

Perhaps, but not for long. The hard, gritty, expensive work of rescuing one of the finest steam sternwheeler packet boats ever built is nearly finished. The folks laboring on the project are hopeful and proud of the enormous work they’ve accomplished, but also exasperated and surprised that the task has been so complicated and taken so long.

“I thought it would be scrapped,” said Capt. Eric Dykman, master of the 98-ton, 128-by-26-foot river boat. He and deckhand Dillon Connor (also an aspiring steam engineer) comprise the present crew. In November Dykman said the work stands at least 75 percent complete. As a pilot on the *Julia Belle* in its last go-round, Dykman can hardly wait to get underway again.

The *Julia Belle* sat tied to the east bank of the Black River in La Crosse, Wis. Paddlewheel, gangplanks and fluted stacks were notably absent. The crew stacked 32 new, bright red pad-

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dlewheel bucket planks that await the return of the rebuilt paddlewheel hubs and spokes. A couple of steel cargo containers, a big propane tank, miscellaneous equipment and a pair of vehicles sat nearby.

The 45-year-old vessel was designed and built with an eye to detail by Dennis Trone, the skilled naval architect,

marine engineer, vice president and half owner of Dubuque Boat and Boiler Co. The *Julia Belle* was underfunded from the start, according to Julia Belle Swain Foundation board member and restoration project manager Barry Blomquist, a master machinist and long-time La Crosse boatbuilder. It was nearly the last boat the company built. Capt. Trone began the *Julia Belle*’s career based in Peoria, Ill., on the Illinois River. It also worked on the Ohio and Tennessee rivers. Musician John Hartford occasionally piloted the boat.

“Paint was the standard maintenance program,” Blomquist said, citing the nearly quarter inch of old paint sandblasted off for the restoration.

After Bob Kalhagen bought the boat from the Trone family, his enterprise hit the 2008 economic snag, and the boat sat idle. The foundation bought it for \$250,000 in 2013.

Though costs are now expected to total nearly \$2.5 million, according



Left: Captain Eric Dykman (standing) with deckhand and steam engineer apprentice Dillon Connor at the *Julia Belle's* restored pilothouse.

Top: Dillon Connor looks over the 101-year-old starboard steam engine. The remnants of the former red and yellow paint will soon be replaced with blue and green paint.

to John Desmond, *Julia Belle Swain* Foundation president, the efforts should get the boat through another 50 years, at least.

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“It doesn’t look very good [cost-wise],” he said, “yet we’ll have no debt.”

“This will not be a beer and pizza boat. It will cost \$1,000 an hour to run. It requires a licensed captain and a licensed steam engineer. We will be seeking donations,” Desmond said. He expects the annual operating budget to be about \$200,000.

“It’s like a church, 10 people fund 90 percent of it.”

Desmond sees the *Julia Belle's* mission as two-fold: During the week the boat will host river history and environmental programs for fifth-graders, and on weekends it will carry large

groups on catered cruises.

“It’ll take a hundred [passengers] to get this boat off the dock,” he said.

The Waterfront Restaurant and Tavern, managed by board member Libby Weber Spierer, will cater cruises. The boat will dock near the Waterfront.

Plans also call for an upriver cruise to Winona, where passengers will visit the Minnesota Marine Art Museum and return to La Crosse by bus.

Not only has the riverboat undergone a resurrection, but it’s been updated — as if one gangplank connects to the 19th century and the other to the 21st. Up top, the formerly open-to-the-weather pilothouse now sports tempered, thermal-pane windows all around and will be air-conditioned. It has the same frame and its original dimensions with a new roof.

The seven-foot, teak pilot wheel — being restored at RealWood Products, La Crosse — extends below the

pilothouse deck. The wheel transfers the pilot’s slightest notion to triple rudders. However, new stainless steel cables — rather than traditional hemp lines — will now connect the two.

Deckhand Connor loves the *Julia Belle's* pair of 101-year-old steam engines, each with a 12-inch bore and five-foot stroke. The well maintained, double-acting pistons originally powered the ferry *City of Baton Rouge*.

Louis Armstrong undoubtedly rode the *City of Baton Rouge*, crossing the Mississippi between Port Allen and downtown Baton Rouge, La., before either of the city’s bridges rose. He heard the same beat of those 1915 Gillett, Eaton and Squire engines, built in Lake City, Minn.

“Those engines could have upwards of four million miles on them, when you think about it!” exclaimed Dykman.

The pistons — on each side of the



Above: *Julia Belle Swain*, about 75 percent restored, was moored on the Black River in La Crosse in early November. The main deck is below ground level here.



Left: Captain and crew stack the new paddlewheel buckets (planks) in preparation for the arrival of the restored paddlewheel.

boat — oppose each other to drive the paddlewheel, with one pulling on its pitman arm while the other pushes. The 26-foot-long, 1,400-pound, long-leaf pine and steel pitmans linking pistons to paddlewheel are being restored in native ash at Misty River Woodworks, Cottage Grove, Wis.

The old *Julia Belle* lost power twice while Dykman was at the helm.

“I lost power twice underway, and we want passengers to be safe,” he said, pointing to the new emergency, auxiliary, 400-horsepower diesel engine connected to a 28-inch propeller just forward of the triple rudders.

The boat also has a new bow thruster, a 16-inch tube through the bow with two props powered by a 35-horsepower electric motor, to help steer.

Below the pilothouse, only the aluminum frame of the original texas deck cabin roof remains. Below that, the

cast iron-clad ornamental stanchions (posts) on the boiler deck are the only originals ones on the boat. This will be the primary dining and education area, seating 80 to 90 passengers, while another 15 to 20 will be seated above, on the texas deck. The boat’s capacity is 149.

Much of the boiler deck cabin, or salon, was widened from nine to 12 feet. All the deck steel beneath the old bulkhead (wall) footprints had almost completely corroded and was replaced.

Hundreds of lineal feet of new aluminum gingerbread trim adorn the roof edges around the boat. The old cast pot metal gingerbread was brittle and missing in places.

All the *Julia Belle*’s 600 feet of railings were raised from 36 to 40 inches to meet the U.S. Coast Guard’s 39-inch-high railing requirement. The new rail spindles match the original fleur-de-lis pattern. New lower guards

will keep small passengers from slipping under the rail.

Inboard of the main deck catwalks, new bull rails of durable plastic with aluminum inserts will keep passengers safe when the boat is underway. Most of the main deck remains open. The main deck heads (bathrooms) are refurbished.

A four-foot-by-five-foot patched hole in the main deck awaits Coast Guard inspection. It is one of three large holes cut in the deck — in addition to several in the hull — to get new machinery into the bilge during six months on a dry dock at Newt Marine in Dubuque, Iowa, in late 2014 and early 2015. Much of the hull was rebuilt, with nearly all new equipment installed below decks — including a new boiler that uses reverse-osmosis-treated water for steam and a separate loop of strained river water for cooling the steam condenser.

Coast Guard requirements have challenged the organization, requiring patient negotiations and consultation with their marine architects at Seacraft Design in Sturgeon Bay, Wis. Board members have traveled to St. Paul, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. to work out details.



The Julia Belle plied the Upper Mississippi during the 2004 Grand Excursion. (Molly McGuire)



Two iron-clad ornamental stanchions (posts) on the boiler deck are the only original ones in the boat.

New fancy arches will welcome passengers who climb the main salon stairway. Nearby, the boat's foredeck capstan sits awaiting a decision whether

“Eric and Dillon did the down and dirty work,” Schultz said. “Eric is totally vested. He loves that boat.”

to remount it or not. The steel of the main foredeck shows repaired rust scarring beneath the capstan.

The *Julia Belle*'s twin diesel generators serve a new 300-amp power panel. A big chiller down below, with coils tucked here and there on the main and boiler decks, will cool those areas. Rooftop units will cool the texas deck and pilothouse.

Two fire emergency water pumps are also below, original hardware with a new coat of red paint, ready to pour river water where it's needed.

Dykman pointed out the new wheelchair lift at the boiler deck apex,

one deck up from the main deck. The Coast Guard does not require the historic boat to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act, but the foundation wanted the lift for older and disabled passengers.

Much of the structural work above the waterline fell to Al Schultz, of Custom Fab and Machine, La Crosse, who wins Dykman's highest praise.

“The boat was cleaned out, only the ornamental (iron-clad) stanchions were left,” said Schultz. “Those and the texas deck cabin overhead aluminum beams were the only original structural elements of the entire deck remaining after restoration.”

“Eric and Dillon did the down and dirty work,” Schultz said. “Eric is totally vested. He loves that boat.”

Indeed, Eric and Dillon carried 40,000 pounds of sandblasting sand off the boat in five-gallon buckets, filling a dump truck. That's 500 trips each, he pointed out.

Schultz got his start at La Crosse Riverboat in the early 1980s, then worked for Mid-City Steel building boats for SkipperLiner, then C&C Machine fab shop building SkipperLiner bows. In 2013, he and partners Kevin Marx and C.J. Pelowski started

Custom Fab and Machine.

“It's very exciting to be working on the boat,” he said. “There's some history — it's an authentic steam paddlewheeler. It's nice to bring it back to life, to keep in on the water in La Crosse, Wisconsin, to keep it in our community.”

Blomquist restored the *Julia Belle*'s calliope, with support from Custom Fab and Machine. He's also restoring the boat's lights and bell.

When will the *Julia Belle Swain* get up steam and roll out onto the big river again? Certainly after ice-out.

“Everything will need two to three weeks of testing,” said Blomquist, “before we call the Coast Guard [for the final inspection].”

So, soon the *Julia Belle* will return to the Mississippi, gleaming white against green riverbanks and limestone bluffs, rounding that bend. 🌊

John Gabbert lives in Winona, Minn. His last story for Big River was “Roll Me to the River,” January-February 2016. His late father, Dean, wrote several articles about the Julia Belle Swain for regional newspapers and The Waterways Journal.